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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the impact of one college's Freshman Orientation Week (FOW) just prior to the fall semester as the first component of an academic achievement and retention enhancement program for at-risk students, The Learning Circle (TLC). TLC provided cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and literacy training in five areas: basic skills literacy, specialized skills literacy, cultural literacy, multicultural literacy, and composite world literacy. During FOW, students lived together and met with a personal learning specialist. TLC included weekly group meetings with the program director, peer mentoring, and study groups. Data were collected via written assessments of what students felt they could and could not handle during the semester and strengths and weaknesses of the program. The FOW developed a strong sense of solidarity among 23 participating students and between these students and participating faculty and administrators. This solidarity and initial bonding helped integrate students into the academic, dormitory, and campus life throughout the semester. All 23 students felt they would be more successful academically and socially following the FOW. They all finished the fall semester, and 91 percent preregistered for the spring semester. Their mean fall semester grade point average was 2.3. (Contains 16 references.) (SM)

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# At-Risk Student Perceptions of the Value of their Freshman Orientation Week Experiences

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# At-Risk Student Perceptions of the Value of their Freshman Orientation Week Experiences

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Abstract

This paper describes some of the results of implementing a Freshman Orientation Week (FOW) at a 2+2 private college just before the fall semester began as the first component of an academic achievement and retention enhancement program for at-risk students called The Learning Circle (TLC). The FOW, as well as the TLC, focused on all five of the Spheres of Literacy identified by Dagostino and Carifio (1994) and not just Basic (academic) Skills and (academic) Cultural literacies as most programs of this kind tend to do.

In general, the FOW developed a very strong sense of solidarity among the 23 at-risk students in the program as well as between these students and the faculty and administrators who participated. This solidarity and initial bonding helped to integrate these at-risk students into the fabric of academic, dormitory and campus life over the course of the fall semester. All 23 at-risk students felt that they would be more successful academically and socially during the fall semester due to what they had learned and their participation in the FOW. And this was the case: all 23 students finished the fall semester and 91% preregistered for the Spring semester. This mid-year retention rate far exceeds the national standard of 22%. These 23 students had a fall semester mean GPA of 2.3, while the cohort group had a mean average of 1.58.

Many of the planned cognitive aspects of the FOW were put on hold in order to deal with the affective and social problems of these students. In fact, the four students who eventually left the college left for social and not academic reasons and were doing well academically, two of them with GPA's over 3.0. Students were of the opinion that the time spent on affective and social problems in the FOW helped them considerably to be successful and cope during the fall semester. Students also identified several aspects of the FOW that needed to be improved, such as highly focused and well-programmmed evening activities and sessions.

Although a Freshman Orientation Week is without doubt a real added cost and labor intensive, the benefits observed in this study were such that it would seem more than well worth the cost and effort and a component that should be added to Jewler's (1989) model of the ideal first year program for at-risk students.

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## Overview

Many higher education institutions have recently implemented "freshman seminar" programs to help increase retention of at-risk students. The actual value of freshman seminar (FS), however, seems to vary widely due to a number of factors (Gardner, 1993; Siegal, 1989). For example, Fidler and Hunter's (1989) review of the literature found a positive relationship between participation in FS programs and higher sophomore return rates as well as improved academic performance and increased knowledge and use of student services. Yet, Fidler and Hunter also point out that **"no matter how well planned,researched based, and pro actively conceived a freshman seminar may be, programs can be...totally destroyed by students' reactions and perceptions (p.228)"** to them. Better understanding of students' perceptions of the different components and experiences of a typical FS program, therefore, could possibly help to improve such programs and to make the outcomes of FS programs more positive and less variable.

Jewler (1989) has outlined the components of an effective freshman seminar program. The ideal FS program is flexible, tailored to meet student needs, designed to enhance student success, and realistically appropriate for students in terms of the standards and norms of the institution they are attending. As Jewler points out, an effective FS program addresses "things students need to learn about themselves, things they need to learn about their own campus, and things they need to learn about the value and meaning of higher education (p.207)," particularly at the institution they are attending.

## Purpose

Mount Ida College is a 2 + 2 open admissions college whose delivery system of services was lagging behind the changing population. As using a freshman seminar type program as one element in a set of strategies to increase student retention rates has been strongly advocated in the literature recently (e.g., Gardner, 1993), the Board of Trustees authorized a pilot initiative for the 1997-1998 Academic Year called The Learning Circle (TLC). Further, one component of FS programs about which little is known empirically is the effectiveness of the Orientation Week, which is usually conducted the week before other students come to the campus. The purpose of the present study, therefore, was to assess students' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the Orientation Week component in the Mount Ida Program in order to understand how this initial component functions in terms of it's stated goals as well as how this program component contributed to overall program success. As Orientation week is an expensive program component in terms of student and staff time as well as the costs of supporting students during this week, research on the effectiveness of the Orientation week component of Freshman Seminar programs has practical as well as theoretical value.

## Conceptual Framework

The general theoretical framework of this study was a cognitive and development view of learning and behavior (see Ashraft, 1994 and Gormly, 1993) which is embedded in the Spheres of Literacy Model outlined by Dagostino and Carifio (1994). Within this general context, Neisser's (1967) theory of perception was used as well as Heider's (1959) attribution theory and Krathwohl's (1964) theory of the affective domain and values and valuing.

The Spheres of Literacy Model (Dagostino and Carifio, 1994) describes 5 general domains or kinds of literacy, each of which is a nested subset of the others. These five spheres of literacy are Basic Skills literacy, Specialized Skills literacy, Cultural literacy, Multi-Cultural literacy, and Composite World (or Critical) literacy. Models of learning and instruction differ in each of these spheres of literacy as well as the cognitive and affective levels at which learners process information. The Learning Circle Program attempts to develop each of these spheres of literacy with at-risk students across the year and not just the Basic Skills and (Academic) Cultural literacies as most post-secondary programs for these students tend to do. Consequently, The Freshman Orientation Week began the process of developing these literacies with an equal emphasis on Basic Skills, Cultural and Multi-Cultural literacies in both the cognitive and affective domains.

Perception, according to Neisser (1967) and cognitive learning theory (Ashcraft, 1994), is basically the construal of information being processed by the individual and the making (or construction) of meaning, which become the basis of thoughts, feelings and actions. Perception, and thus the construction of meaning, works by an analysis-by-synthesis process (Neisser, 1967) and is schema driven, as well as schema altering, and is the fundamental reason why "expectations" are such powerful determinants of and "drive" thinking, feeling, and behavior. Further, what one perceives or believes to be the cause of events, including what happens to oneself and one's own behavior in various situations, is an extremely strong determinant of one's thinking, feeling, and behavior, and is the reason why a person's causal attribution patterns (Heider, 1959) are so important.

For example, if a student's perception (belief) is that academic success is basically luck or the professor liking or disliking her or him, then time management or study skills is not going to be meaningful, relevant, or attended to by this student until something is done about this fundamental perception and causal attribution and belief. Therefore, knowing how students' perceive what they are experiencing is important knowledge to have in order to better understand how education activities work or do not work with them, as well as how these perceptions need to be altered or may be capitalized upon and what educational activities and help they need.

Academic locus of control theory (see Lefcourt, 1992) is a subset of causal attribution theory as is self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1985) to a great degree. Both of these latter theories have been quite popular recently relative to analyzing and theorizing about at-risk students.

Krathwohl's taxonomy of the affective domain (Krathwohl et al., 1964) provides a structured and hierarchical framework that begins with receiving and responding willingness, styles, and behaviors and progresses to satisfactions, values, commitment and value systems. Krathwohl's taxonomy is of value in devising and evaluating systematic instructional activities as well as in assessing the development progression of students in terms of themselves and their understanding of others. As Krathwohl points out, there are many kinds of affective skills, learnings and literacies, and deficiencies in these affective items may impede and quite often inhibit cognitive, metacognitive, and behavioral learning and performance. It is for these reasons that the affective domain and affective development was such a strong component of the Freshman Orientation Week and The Learning Circle Program.

The Learning Circle Program

The Learning Circle Program provides specific cognitive, metacognitive, affective and behavioral skills and literacy trainings in the five literacy areas identified above. It also serves as a social system or "surrogate family" for the students. The Learning Circle consists of 5 components:

1. The Freshman Orientation Week;

2. A personal Learning Specialist that met with each student one hour a week. The LS provided weekly course and basic skills tutoring, personal counseling and academic advising. Learning Specialists work directly with faculty and the administration on behalf of the student which entails both mediation and advocacy. The LS kept logs of each session indicating what type of support was offered/needed: academic, emotional or social;

3. A weekly group meeting with the Director of the program continued the sense of solidarity, and also gave the students a place to vent the week's frustrations and triumphs and a platform for more structured discussions surrounding social issues such as date rape, and so on;

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4. A Peer Mentoring system included 5 sophomore students who had demonstrated leadership skills and agreed to be dedicated to the success of their assigned TLC students. Mentors gave their students their phone number and set up scheduled hours of availability. Mentors met with their students weekly and kept a log of all contact. Mentors were encouraged to keep in contact with the student's Learning Specialist;
and,

5. The Muhammad Ali Study Group was an after hours tutoring center open to all students but TLC students were required to attend at least twice a week. The Study Group had professional and peer tutors but was also used to foster a norm of regular study hours.

A more detailed description of the program is available elsewhere (see TLC Handbook, 1997).

Freshman Orientation Week

The FOW was developed by a steering committee that included campus-wide personnel. Its core operating principle was that the most effective support programs for at-risk students provide affective, behavioral and social assistance in addition to cognitive support services to achieve academic success.

The program began with an activity designed to break the ice, force students to identify their goals and their different roles in life. This "initiation" of getting up on stage and presenting their conclusions to one another began the bonding process.

The group lived together in a dormitory for the summer orientation week. By the end of the week they had seen each other at their best and worst. Every day students were awakened at 7:00 a.m. and the day was filled with classes on study skills, time and money management, computer skills, purpose and rewards of a getting a college degree and academic conduct and standards. Other sessions included getting to know the campus, college personnel (faculty and administrators) and team building challenges. Several sessions were devoted to self-esteem building, conflict resolution techniques and discussions of feelings, hopes and fears. The week culminated in a special "graduation" dinner where students were awarded a $500 letter of credit at the campus bookstore. The week was well planned to address the cognitive, affective and behavioral domains.

(A detailed schedule of this week can be found in the the TLC Handbook 1997).



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## Methodology

Twenty three (23) students who met the United States Department of Education's definition of being an At-Risk student were selected by the college admission staff to participate in the Learning Circle Program. All of these students were the first in their families to attend college. Ten (10) of the 23 students were female, 15 were black, 3 were Hispanic, 1 was Asian and 4 were white. A blind Cohort Group of at-risk Mount Ida freshman was also chosen for comparative assessment. The identities of the Cohort Group remain anonymous in keeping with the accords of the Family Privacy Act of 1974.

Data were collected from participating students concerning their perceptions of the Orientation Week Program in a variety of both formal and informal procedures both during the week and a week after the program was completed, when participants had first hand experience with their classes, professors, and peers. The data reported in this paper are drawn primarily from the formal written assessment procedure done a week after the orientation week was completed. (See Appendix for Instrument).

This formal assessment procedure asked students to list the three things that they felt they would be able to handle during the semester and the three things that they felt they would not be able to handle. Students were also asked to list three strengths and three weakness of the Orientation Program and two other similar questions.

Students made their lists on separate sheets of paper. Once their list were complete, they were then asked to go back and reflect and write the reasons for the items they had put on their lists in order to separate the generation of list items from the evaluation and contextualization of list items. All responses were made using a self-generated code name made up by each student to ensure confidentiality.

The responses made by students were content analyzed according to the standard content analysis procedures outlined by Weber (1980) and Miles and Huberman (1994). Subjects' key word, phrases, and short sentences were coded into a matrix of factors which reflected the components, goals and objectives of the Orientation Week program and the theoretical framework used for this study and the generalizations drawn from this matrix were checked for consistency against the other sources of data about the Orientation Week program that were collected.

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**Results**

Some of the major findings from the content analysis of the matrix of factors by questions described above were as follows:

-The orientation week developed a strong sense of solidarity among students. All 23 students identified making friends and being a part of a group as a major benefit of Orientation Week. More than one third of the group wanted to room with each other rather than the roommates the college assigned to them. Workshops conducted by college administrators resulted in increased communication and bonding between administrators and students.

-All 23 students listed at least 3 key things that they felt that they could handle better as a result of Orientation Week and all 23 were optimistic that they would successfully complete the first semester. The items most cited that they felt they could handle better were study skills and time management.

-Due to student's extreme needs, questions, and confusions in the affective and developmental areas, the cognitive based activities in the training sessions were largely put on hold in many of the sessions during the week. Affective and social problem areas were the areas that students cited as not being confident about handling well. This finding strongly underscored the importance of the affective domain as outlined above and the importance of the affective focus in the FOW and TLC and the need for a strong and on-going counseling component.

-Students cited several aspects of the Orientation week that needed improvement. These were length of sessions, little attention to the evening hours and how they could be used constructively to help students be better prepared for the semester, and topics that should have been addressed that were not.

-All 23 at-risk students felt that they would be more successful academically and socially during the fall semester due to what they had learned and their participation in the FOW. The TLC students were assessed by tracking a Cohort Group. A comparative analysis of the 2 groups reveals that The Learning Circle retention rate of 91% was in contrast to the 80% of the Cohort Group as of one week prior to Spring Semester. Although two additional students left the college by stabilization, it is clear that the early preregistration of TLC students bespeaks a high desire to return to Mount Ida attributable to positive first semester experiences.

- As Lettieri (1998) reported to the Mount Ida Board of Trustees, comparative mean GPA's reveal a 2.3 for TLC participants and a 1.58 for the Cohort Group. Average GPA's were 2.29 for the TLC group as compared to 1.65 for the Cohort Group. Translated into qualitative terms, The Learning Circle students


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as a group attained a C+ average which earned a "fair" academic standing based on College-wide standards. In contrast, the Cohort Group attained a D+ grade average and achieved a "poor but passing" academic standing. In most tangible terms, 67% of the TLC students earned GPA's of C or better, with nearly 40% earning B- or better. This stands in contrast to the Cohort Group where 65% had GPA's of D+ or lower. The Learning Circle's .64 and .72 higher GPA respective averages and means are more than double the .30 achieved in our nation's TRIO Programs.

-All 23 students were well bonded to the college at the end of the first semester and had a strong commitment to getting a college degree even if it meant transferring to a public institution because of financial factors, which 2 students did after the Spring Semester began. All 23 students also felt that they were well served by The Learning Circle Program and its staff, even given the many difficulties they and the program experienced over the semester.

Some of the other reasons why the Freshman Orientation Week helped to promote this strong bonding and commitment by at-risk students are given in Conclusions and Discussion section below. However, even though a Freshman Orientation Week is without doubt a real added cost and labor intensive, the benefits observed in this study were such that it would seem more than well worth the cost and effort and should be added to Jewler's model of the ideal first year program for at-risk students.

**Conclusions and Discussion**

The purpose of the present study was to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the Orientation Week component of The Learning Circle Program at Mount Ida College in order to understand how this initial component functions in terms of it's stated goals as well as how this program component contributed to overall program success. At-risk students' perceptions, professional participant observations, program documents and a variety of other formal and informal data sources were used to conduct this assessment. Students' perceptions and professional participant observations were formally collected three weeks after the orientation week and at the end of the fall semester. Informal data were collected on an on-going basis.

In general, the Freshman Orientation Week (FOW) developed a very strong sense of solidarity among the 23 at-risk students in the program as well as between these students and the faculty and administrators who participated. This solidarity and initial bonding helped to integrate these at-risk students into the fabric of academic, dormitory and campus life over the course of the fall semester.

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As previously stated, all 23 at-risk students felt that they would be more successful academically and socially during the fall semester due to what they had learned and their participation in the FOW. And they were as the data presented above clearly indicated.

One of the unanticipated outcomes of the FOW was that many of the cognitive aspects of planned activities had to be put on hold to deal with the affective and social problems of these students. During the week, we became aware that the students' were unable to attend to the planned activities. So, as Jewler (1989) recommends, we adjusted. For example, financial aid was an overwhelming concern for many of these students. They could not learn "study skills" while wondering if they would attain financial clearance. As an open admissions college, this is often a student concern. We asked the Dean of Financial Aid to address the group. She answered questions, made appointments, and so on until the students felt confident that their fears were heard and were being addressed.

Another adjustment was made when we took the group to Boston for a planned historical and cultural tour. It was toward the end of the week and people were tired and grumbling. We asked them what they wanted to do. "Walk around and shop" was the response. We asked them to pair up, set a meeting time and place and set them free for the afternoon.

More than anything, this flexibility built a bond of trust between the students and their perception of Mount Ida College. This positioned the college as an institution that strives to meet their needs rather than just implementing an established plan. Students were of the opinion that the time spent on affective and social problems in the FOW helped them considerably to be successful and cope during the fall semester. In fact, the four students who left the college left for social and not academic reasons and were doing well academically, two of them with GPA's over 3.0. Students also identified several aspects of the FOW that needed to be improved, such as highly focused and well-programmmed evening activities and sessions.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENTS/CHANGES OF THE PROGRAM

1. The students' obligations and opportunities should be clearly stated in a formal contract and signed prior to the FOW. This contract will then be used by the students for periodic self-evaluation.

2. More cognitive skills could be infused into the program if the day sessions were shorter while the great need for affective activities could be addressed in carefully planned evening activities.

3. More needs to be done to encourage all faculty involvement.



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In addition to its focus on multiple literacies, assessing, validating and changing students perceptions and students' cognitive skills, attitudes, values and behaviors, the Freshman Orientation Week was successful, we believe, for other reasons also. Giving new at-risk students, who are not particularly confident or secure, "time with the campus" and key staff when hardly anyone else was around made it much easier and far less threatening for them to explore the campus, to bond with it and feel that it was "their own" than during the initial weeks of the fall semester when everyone, including faculty and staff, is feeling "overwhelmed" and "frenetic." This factor could be seen as an application of Wolpe's (1959) systematic desensitization theory and somewhat like getting the feel of a stage or basketball court before you actually have to perform on it when no one is around.

Another aspect of the Freshman Orientation Week conducted before the campus is in full operation is that it gives the new at-risk student a simplified and focused environment of greatly reduced complexity with fewer distractions which allows the student to be less overwhelmed by over choice, ambiguity, overload, fear, and confusion. This,in turn, helps the new at-risk student to develop a sense that being successful at college is actually "doable" by her or him. One must not forget that many of these at-risk students are "ADD" to some degree and that the first few months of freshman year are overwhelming for most students.

The relatively simplified and focused environment of the Freshman Orientation week also allows new at-risk students to more easily make friends and develop a social support system and "surrogate family," which is perhaps more important for these students than other first year students. Similarly, the week also makes the new at-risk students more recognizable and real as an individual and as a person (and not just another face on campus) to key faculty, staff, and administrators. This personalization not only helps the new at-risk student to get "better service," but also help to promote a feeling of acceptance and then bonding and identification with the college.

Given all of the above, it would seem reasonable to say that although a Freshman Orientation Week is without doubt a real added cost and labor intensive, the benefits observed in this study were such that it would seem more than well worth the cost and effort and a component that should be added to Jewler's model of the ideal first year program for at-risk students.

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